

UNIVERSITY OF TARTU
Faculty of Social Sciences and Education
Institute of Government and Politics

Silja-Madli Ossip

Muslim women and their identities in Lyon, France

Bachelor thesis

Supervisors:
Kristina Muhhina, PhD
Alar Kilp, PhD

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Introduction

Muslim community and the practices of Islam are very current topics in France and in fact Islam has been in the centre of public debates in France over the past 40 years. French state describes itself as secular, which means for the country that no religion should get special attention from the Government. At the same time, as the Muslim population is becoming bigger, it draws more State's attention. The country wants to make sure that Islamic practices are not too visible in the public's eye. In the Republicans' view, there is a certain way how a French citizen should act and often the Islam religious practices are not part of this view. For that, France has for example voted two laws in 2004 and 2011 about wearing the veil in the public space, which has created more difficulties for veiled Muslim women.

The life of Muslim communities is relatively complicated in France. It is more difficult to practice their religion without being noticed or live a stable life because of discrimination about their roots when finding a job or wearing the veil when going to school. As veiled women have become the symbol of Islam religion in France, it is even harder for them to be French citizens with full rights. They are often seen as the extremists of Islam because of the veil and sometimes they feel left out from the society. This makes a part of French Muslim community bitter about France, its society and laws, while at the same time there are Muslims who understand the necessity of blending in and agree to the French integration policies.

The purpose of this study is to explore the French Muslims' identities in the French state and society through the storytelling and narratives of young Muslim women in France. These life stories will also show how different the Muslim women's feelings in France can be and that it is hard to talk about one specific reality. The study will focus on female stories, as Muslim women are more visible in the French society with their practices than males and the Muslim veil has caused a lot of controversy in France. Next to the four exemplary life stories of young Muslim women, the study gives a broader reality-check about the current situation of Muslim minority in France.

The study starts with giving the theoretical background about Islam in France: the growth of the Muslim population in France, to see where the problem for French people comes from and secondly, the Islamic practices among Muslim women in France. Afterwards the topic will be analysed in four major points through existent materials and four life

stories to give an interesting output. Through previous research and narratives the author will show how young Muslim women are finding and creating their Muslim identities in France. There will be valuable input about which religious practices young Muslims are following in France and how important wearing the veil for them is. Also they will give their point of view about how French state and society regards the Muslim community and based on that how they see their life perspectives in France or abroad.

1. Islam in French Society

1.1. Expansion of Muslim Community in France

Almost 10% of the French population is Muslim and it is expected that in 10 years every fifth Frenchman will be a Muslim¹. Living together in the society requires common basic values, which justifies for French Republicans all policies according to this idea. This means that all immigrants need take on the values and behaviours that signify that one is a French.² Based on the reports of the High Council of Integration “French universalism” cannot acknowledge the rights of minorities. France insists on being the secular state and refuses to recognise groups of individuals, only individuals one by one exist in the eyes of the Republic. The French republican philosophy of integration can be summarised in four principles:

- 1) Immigrant integration always needs to be in accord with the secular principle, which means that every religion is appreciated but they will not get support from the country,
- 2) It is easier to integrate individuals rather than groups, so there will be no support for structured communities,
- 3) Immigrants need to first follow the French laws and in return the law respects their culture and traditions,
- 4) French citizens and immigrants must be equal and immigrants should not feel favoured by the country.³

At the same time, immigration is continuing and immigration in France pretty much equals Islam, as 90% of the immigrants entering to Europe are Muslims⁴. Although the Muslim populations subjected to France come from different areas of the world, then Tunisians, Moroccans and Algerians have mostly marked the French Muslim policies and

¹ Raphaël Liogier. (2012) *Le mythe de l'islamisation: essai sur une obsession collective*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, pp 48-50

² John Richard Bowen. (2007) *Why the French don't like headscarves: Islam, the State, and public space*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 11

³ Jeremy Jennings. (2000) “Citizenship, Republicanism and Multiculturalism in Contemporary France”, *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 30, no. 4, pp 582-583

⁴ Liogier. (2012), p. 49

attitudes⁵. Around 60-70% of Muslim immigrants in France come from those three countries⁶.

76% of French population thinks that Islam has progressed too much in France⁷. Islam appears to be everywhere – in television, supermarkets, in the street, etc.⁸. Since 1970s Islam has taken a considerable place in the French daily news, but the world of images is actually dominated by the words. The words that are used in the French media to talk about Islam are: “Muslims”, “Islamists”, “immigrants”, “fundamentalism”, “Islamism”, “Islamic”, etc.⁹ Most of people do not make a difference or do not know how to draw the lines between them. For example if we look in the dictionary, the words “Islam” and “Islamism” have been given as synonyms. In the reality though, when we talk about “Islamism”, we risk that the readers confront it with “extremism”.¹⁰

In 1980s Muslims went through a change in their identities in France – no longer were their identities seen as immigrants, but they were rather seen as Muslims. This also results in being one of the sources of scandals.¹¹ For the French people Muslims have the role of the villain, the violence and the responsible of all disorder, which makes people paranoid. There are several facts that build this Islamic-paranoia, for example the increase of Muslim population in big French cities (Paris, Lyon and Marseille) or having Muslims living in the poor suburbs which is directly connected with drug trafficking or violence in people’s minds.¹²

Islam is a second religion practiced in France after Christianity, so for many people the question remains: whether French country is too tolerant towards Islam and Muslims and if there will exist French people in 30 years?¹³ French are afraid that soon France will be

⁵ Bowen. (2007), p. 34

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 50

⁷ Liogier. (2012), p. 48

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 122

⁹ Thomas Deltrombe. (2007) *L’islam imaginaire: La construction médiatique de l’islamophobie en France, 1975-2005*. Paris: Éditions La Découverte, p 6-7

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 143

¹¹ Bowen. (2007), p. 65

¹² Liogier. (2012), pp. 121-127

¹³ Deltrombe. (2007), pp. 74-75

an Islamic State¹⁴. Throughout the history France has fought against Church's efforts to control people's minds and the State has been trying to produce citizens against everything religious. Integration and secularism have been the two pillars of Republican policy.¹⁵ The legacy of the conflict between the State and the Church helps to explain why many current teachers and intellectuals see the contemporary Islam in the schools as a threat to go back to the two struggles of keeping religion from controlling young minds and to keep the common French identity.¹⁶ Integrating Muslims into Western societies has received a central concern whether the Islamic beliefs hinder Muslims' abilities to participate successfully in societies based on secular principles¹⁷.

1.2. Women's Islamic practices in the French Society

There are obligations that provide a framework to Muslim's life and guide them through their everyday activities. Islam regards it as pointless to live life without putting faith into action and practice. Carrying out the Five Pillars of Islam demonstrates that the Muslims are putting their faith first and not just trying to fit it in around their secular lives. Five Pillars consist of *Shahadah* (Muslim faith towards the God), *Salat* (Muslim prayers five times per day in the proper way), *Zakat* (paying the "charity tax" to the poor), *Sawm* (fasting during the month of Ramadan) and *Hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca).¹⁸

For Muslim women it is important to keep shyness (*sharam*) as a general attitude of self-respect by reserving oneself. *Sharam* is considered a woman's real "jewellery," expected at all stages of life, without which she is seen as empty, graceless and naked. *Sharam* can also be considered as modesty in front of males by avoiding talking with any man outside the immediate family.¹⁹ Shyness can also be presented with wearing a *hijab* in the public

¹⁴ Liogier. (2012), p. 50

¹⁵ Bowen. (2007), pp. 12-13

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 24

¹⁷ Kristine J. Ajrouch. (2007) "Global Contexts and the Veil: Muslim Integration in the United States and France", *Sociology of Religion*, vol. 68, no. 3, p. 321

¹⁸ The Five Pillars of Islam, Religions BBC, (2009) URL.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/practices/fivepillars.shtml> (visited 4 May 2015)

¹⁹ Anjum Alvi. (2013) "Concealment and Revealment: The Muslim Veil in Context", *Current Anthropology*, vol. 54, no. 2, p. 181

space, interpreting the veil as a religious principle and along with it women's position in relation to the male realm. Also marriage can be seen as concealing *Sharam*.²⁰

According to some Muslims, the wearing of the headscarf by women in public is a religious duty. There are also many Muslims, men and women, who maintain the idea that wearing a veil is not an obligation in Islam, and it is undoubtedly true that even those who wear it may do so for a variety of motives.²¹

Based on a study conducted in France by Caitlin Killian in 2007 (interviewed 43 Muslim women from Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria) Islam continues to play an important role in Muslim women's lives, even if they have lived in France for a long time. Around a third of French Muslims may not follow all Islamic practices, but they still self-identify themselves as Muslims. At the same time living in a secular country has affected the religious practices of the women and according to them:

- 1) It is hard to celebrate Muslim holidays in France. For example Fasting during Ramadan is a uniting experience for the members of the community. In Maghreb everyone fasts in the same way to obey its God, but in France it is very hard to carry it out.
- 2) Practising Muslims should be praying five times per day, but with the French working hours it is quite hard to keep up with the prayer times. At the same time people who work still can do the prayers, they just need to save up all the prayers for the evening.
- 3) Many of the women grew up with the veil in their countries of origin, but they abandoned it in France to work, to be hired or to fit in. The traditional practice of veiling in Muslim countries demarks men's space or public space, out of the women's space at home.²²

In 2004 Muslims became subjects of the law when France introduced an article in the French Education Code that goes as following: "In state primary and secondary schools, the wearing of signs or dress by which pupils overtly manifest a religious affiliation is

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 183

²¹ Talal Asad. (2006) "French Secularism and the French Islamic Veil Affair", *The Hedgehog Review*, vol. 8, nos. 1-2, p. 96

²² Caitlin Killian. (2007) "From a Community of Believers to an Islam of the Heart: "Conspicuous" Symbols, Muslim Practices, and the Privatization of Religion in France", *Sociology of Religion*, vol. 68, no. 3, pp. 310-312

prohibited”²³. It actually represents the principle of neutrality: that no one would exhibit its religious or political beliefs in the school environment. So although this law is meant for all religious items (like Jewish *kippah* or big Catholic crosses) then mainly Muslim women felt attacked.²⁴ As a secular signification the veil got banned because it is a religious symbol, but also because it signifies the low legal status of women in the Muslim societies²⁵.

The headscarf worn by Muslim schoolgirls became the symbol of many aspects of social and religious life among Muslim immigrants²⁶, but a few years later in 2009 Muslim women wearing *niqab* or *burqa* on the street came into the public’s eye. In the Republicans’ eyes, face veil was a provocation towards the State’s values and showing one’s face had to be an obligation for a French citizen.²⁷ President at the time, Nicolas Sarkozy, made a declaration in the Congress:

The problem of *burqa* is not a problem of religion, it is a problem of liberty and dignity of the women. It is not a religious sign, it is a sign of enslavement and lowering. I want to formally say, that *burqa* is not welcome on the territory of the Republic.²⁸

Two years later, in 2011, an anti-*burqa* law, prohibiting concealment of the face in public spaces in France, came into force. It is important to mention that there had been only a few hundred women covering their face with a *niqab* or *burqa* in France.²⁹ This law bans actually all facial covers to be worn in public, including masks and costumes, but it is clearly mainly meant for Muslim women wearing a face veil.³⁰

²³ Ellen Wiles. (2007) “Headscarves, Human Rights, and Harmonious Multicultural Society: Implications of the French Ban for Interpretations of Equality”, *Law and Society Review*, vol. 41, no. 3, pp. 3, 33

²⁴ Liogier. (2012), pp. 182-183

²⁵ Asad. (2006), p. 97

²⁶ Asad. (2006), p. 93

²⁷ Liogier. (2012), p. 85

²⁸ Sarkozy: «La burqa n'est pas la bienvenue sur le territoire de la République», *Libération*, (2009) URL. http://www.liberation.fr/politiques/2009/06/22/sarkozy-la-burqa-n-est-pas-la-bienvenue-sur-le-territoire-de-la-republique_566253 (visited 2 May 2015)

²⁹ Liogier. (2012), p. 183

³⁰ Ban on full Islamic veil comes into force, *France 24*, (2011) URL. <http://www.france24.com/en/20110411-france-ban-full-islamic-veil-sarkozy-ump-muslim-law-police-secularism-burqa> (visited 30 April 2015)

In the book “*Les filles voilées parlent*” by Chouder, Latrèche and Tevanian³¹ there are many stories about Muslim women in France who wear the veil, but the law introduced in 2004 made their lives more complicated. They often feel themselves excluded from the social, political and civic life. They feel discriminated by employers and are refused from the French associative life.³² An example can be brought from Lalla, who sees her live as very complicated in France:

Secularism should not be contrary to Islam. Secularism should respect everyone, without exceptions. Whether you are Muslim, Jew, Christian or atheist, you have the right to be and no one should bother you because of that. But here [in France], it is contrary! [...] I am not very optimistic for the future, because I feel there is more and more racism and islamophobia. We [women wearing the veil] are taken as extremists because we want to practice our religion freely.³³

³¹ Ismahane Chouder, Malika Latrèche, Pierre Tevanian. (2008) *Les filles voilées parlent*. Paris: Éditions La Fabrique

³² Chouder, Latrèche, Tevanian. (2008), p. 273

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 274-276

2. Research Problem and Questions

The purpose of the study “Muslim women and their identities in Lyon, France” is to bring closer the multiple realities experienced by Muslim women in Lyon that are expressed in their personal narratives. A comparison with the theoretical background is necessary to see how the four young Muslim women in Lyon feel about living in France, whether they do or do not blend into the society. Author wants to deeply understand the identities of the young women, their religious practices and their future perspectives. It is important for the author to see whether the young Muslims support the secular policy run by the State or not.

Author decided to take city of Lyon in France as the centre of the research because:

- Lyon is the second biggest metropolitan in France – for example the second biggest university of France is located there and the population of the city is very multicultural³⁴.
- Author lived in Lyon from September 2013 until January 2014 as an Erasmus exchange student and was able to conduct the interviews there herself by having a closer connection to the respondents.

Accordingly, the central research question in the study is: “How do Muslim women define their Muslim identity in France?”

Based on the central question, the sub-topics will be the following:

- What are the Islamic practices that Muslim women are following in France?
- What is the importance of the veil for Muslim women in France?
- What is the attitude of the French state and society towards the Muslim community in France and how do they influence the everyday life of Muslims?
- What are the perspectives of the Muslim women’s lives and whether they want to stay in France in the future or not?

³⁴ France. *The official website of France*. URL. <http://www.france.fr/en/institutions-and-values/france>
(visited 4 May 2015)

3. Methodology

The study is a qualitative analysis based on four interviews with four young Muslim women living in Lyon, France. The interviews were formed into life stories to have a clearer overview and finally turned into narratives to analyse and compare them better to each other and to the theoretical framework. Narrative analysis gives the author the chance to see every life story as it is and based on the research questions focus on the major dimensions in the narratives. The study has followed the concept of the article “Exploring the Reproduction of Conflict Through Narrative: Israeli Youth Motivated to Participate in a Coexistence Program” by Phillip L. Hammack³⁵, where the focus in the story is also four life stories which have been analysed with narrative analysis.

In order to collect materials and analyse them based on the research questions, the author has decided to use the interview method. Interviews seek knowledge of a social situation or of a life history, such as for example biographical interviews³⁶. This follows exactly how the gathered material should be like in order to formulate life stories. The number of subjects necessary for the interview depends on the purpose of a study. If the aim is to understand the world as experienced by specific people, say in a biographical interview, then a few respondents is enough³⁷. In the research about Muslim women’s identities, it is rather necessary to understand deeply a few life stories than make large conclusions, so the author decided to interview four young women. The categories for the interviewees to be chosen were: being female in their twenties, identify themselves as Muslim and live in Lyon, France. The author tried to look for very different origins and backgrounds among the respondents in order to create a big variety of life stories and to show how different the practices of Islam can be.

A qualitative interview is usually semi-structured, it has a sequence of themes to be covered, as well as some prepared questions. Yet at the same time there is openness to changes of sequence and question forms in order to follow up the answers given and the stories told by the interviewees.³⁸ This is why the author also decided to create a semi-

³⁵ Hammack, Phillip L. (2009) “Exploring the Reproduction of Conflict Through Narrative: Israeli Youth Motivated to Participate in a Coexistence Program”, *Peace and Conflict*, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 49-74

³⁶ Kvale, Steinar. (2007) *Doing interviews*. Wiltshire: The Cromwell Press Ltd., p. 38

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 43

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 65

structured interview model (Annex 1), to also be able to listen and ask extra questions. Transcribing the interviews from an oral to a written mode structures the interview conversations in a form closer to analysis³⁹. In the current study all interviews were done in French, three interviews were transcribed based on the recordings and one interview was already conducted in a written format.

After transcribing, the text was formed into life stories for two reasons: firstly, to give a better overview of the stories and secondly, to translate them into English to use them more easily in the following work (Annex 2). Life storytelling is a process of creating and recreating one's life. The key to meaning-making through life storytelling, for the one telling the story, is reflective thinking. If a person is reflective, or naturally reflects on, understands, and is consciously aware of what one is saying, its meaning will usually be evident even as they are telling the story to others.⁴⁰ This is how the author managed to successfully turn the transcriptions into life stories, as the interviewees were very reflective about their lives.

A life story interview is a highly personal encounter: an analysis of a life story is highly subjective and may have as much to do with the quality and depth of the interpersonal exchange itself as with any theory that might be applied to the content of the narrative⁴¹. After the life stories were created, all four interviewees read through their corresponding story written by the author and gave their approval to the presented text.

In order to analyse the life stories and compare them with the theoretical framework, the author is using narrative analysis. Narratives bring into the open rich, detailed and often personal perspectives. Narrative analysis draws from the social constructionist notion that narratives are always part of the constitution of the social, cultural and political world. This means that narrative analysis is thus inseparable from concerns of the narrative constitution of selves, identities and social realities.⁴² Narrative analysis in this study will

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 94

⁴⁰ Atkinson, Robert. (1998) *The Life Story Interview*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc., p. 63

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 59

⁴² Hyvärinen, Matti. (2008) "Analyzing Narratives and Story-Telling", in: Pertti Alasuutari, Leonard Bickman, Julia Brannen (Ed.) *The SAGE Handbook of Social Research Methods*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd., p. 447

give the chance to express each four stories as they were told, focusing on the main dimensions.

The major dimensions are created according to the central research questions, so the dimensions that will be analysed are: (1) religious practices, (2) importance of the veil, (3) influence of the French state and society, and (4) future perspectives. Finally, in the “Discussion” part, author will compare the stories between themselves and try to find similarities or differences with the current French reality from the theoretical part to bring some interesting outputs.

The four young Muslim women chosen for the study have different origins. Three of the respondents are born in France, but two out of them have roots from Algeria. One of the respondents was born in Tunisia. A very special case is the two women with Algerian background because they are sisters but practice their religion differently. All the four respondents have university education in France and are in their twenties. Two interviewees are married, one of them just had a baby and the other one is pregnant. The religious practices vary a lot among the respondents so this is what was interesting and why the author chose them. One respondent generally does not practice her religion, second one of them practices, but not completely and the two veiled girls are the most strict which Islamic rules. Author met with those four women during her stay in Lyon through University Lyon 2 and an association called AIESEC. Before the interviews were conducted, author made sure of the general background of the women to get a maximum richness to the study.

It is important to note that the narratives of the four young Muslim women interviewed for this study do not necessarily represent the entire population of Muslim women in France. The women in the study each had their own opinion and it is not possible to bring common conclusions among the four, so it would be even harder to generalise this study to the whole female Muslim community in France. However, this feature of the life story samples make the study more interesting and close to the reader. The use of the life stories and narratives for this study enable to compare the existing materials and give a more personal approach to the topic.

4. Results of Narrative Analysis

4.1. Asya: Making her own journey

Asya is a 28-year-old veiled French Muslim. She was born in France, but her parents moved from Algeria in the 1960s. She finds it hard to define whether she is Algerian or French, but it is important for her to say that she has Arabic roots. Although she was born into a secular country and did not have any religious studies at school, her parents gave her religious education throughout her life. Religious practices are very important for her. As every Muslim should, she follows the Five Pillars of Islam and she puts her faith and religion first in her life. Afterwards she does other things according to what is allowed and what not:

My practices of Islam are done based on the faith I have, faith for me is the core of Islam. The prayers are the second most important in Islam. But it is never enough to just follow the Five Pillars. A practicing Muslim should always give a little bit more, put a little more effort. For example, you can do more than five prayers per day or fast three days per week, so it would be like multiple Ramadan. You make your own journey towards the God. It is always important to look for God in everything you do.⁴³

According to religious practices, the Quran for her is the most important text to follow on a daily basis as it is written by the God. In her opinion it is a personal effort to read the Quran every day and if something is said in the Quran, it needs to be followed, it is like a law of Islam. She tells herself: “Go towards the Quran, go towards the God, go towards the message!”

Asya is sure that at a certain age parents should also tell their daughter(s) how a Muslim girl should dress, what should be her attitude and what the importance of the veil is. Her parents had never obliged her with anything and even her mother was not wearing the veil properly. At the same time she knows that that the veil is important as it satisfies the God. The obligation of wearing the veil for her is clearly stated in the Quran, so she is content when she manages to please the God by wearing the veil every day despite the difficulties she is facing because of the French community around her. Asya says that the veil for her is an outcome of a journey. She had always wanted to wear it, but she had

⁴³ Interview no 1 with Asya, 22 January 2014, Lyon, France

been afraid of what other people would say or the negative comments of the society, plus she says she did not have the complete motivation. She was 22 years old when she started wearing it:

I went back to university after a while and saw a girl there who had just started wearing the veil 2-3 months before. And this made me think how she has come to the point of wearing it. I had been waiting for the right moment and as she was there, she took me to the mosque and let's say she helped me to practice my religion more. When I was next to her I realised that she doesn't have many things more than me. "We are both Muslim and we both do our prayers. Why am I not wearing the veil?" I told myself, "Let's do this!" I put on the veil one time, I went outside and I never took it off! I understood that if I had asked myself too many questions, I would have never started wearing it. So I can say she had an influence on me, but an indirect one.⁴⁴

The veil for her is much more than just a headscarf, it is an attitude, expression and behaviour. She views it as a language, for example if someone sees her with the veil, it is visible that she is a Muslim. Also, everything that might seduce men – the hair or the body, should be hidden in her opinion. There are some women who say that the veil is not obliged or important by the Quran but according to her, there can be no misinterpretation and people should not mix their opinion with the Quran. People often say that they are Muslims but they do not practice, but in her opinion it is playing with the words of the Quran and it is rather about their faith or effort. For her this is contradictory to Islamic values and religious principles.

Asya says that the Western world has had an impact on the practices of Islam. In France she sees that there is a lot of discrimination and racism towards the Muslim community. Every day when she goes out she is ready to hear remarks and she knows that the society does not understand Islam. While in Muslim countries it is important to women to wear veils because then they have more respect from men.

In France I am obliged to take off my veil when I take a picture for my passport or identity card. Imagine when I need to show my passport anywhere where a man looks at it, I do not feel good.⁴⁵

Also the laws in 2004 and 2011 in France changed a lot for her in the society. She says that there had already been problems in 2004 because of the rule about not wearing veils

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

in schools, but after 2011 there is even more aggression. For her the law about not wearing a *niqab* on the streets means nothing, as there had been only a small group of women wearing it. She sees that the French state thinks that this [covering the face] is Islam, but it is not true. She also feels a big change in the way Muslims and Islam is seen by the French community. She says it is even harder for women than men, as they are more visible [with the veils]. According to Asya, there is more and more aggression towards Muslims and that she feels more attacked than ever. For her it gives a wish to leave France in the future.

Although she concludes that it is not impossible to be a Muslim in the Western world and in the French society, she says it just depends how someone feels about him/herself. She grew up in France, she speaks French and she feels it as part of her identity, but at the same time she does not forget about her roots. After her visits in Algeria, she felt even a stronger wish to leave France:

I do not want to hide it, but in the future I have a plan to leave and go live in a Muslim country. When I visited Algeria, my faith evolved. I started to feel Islam more strongly. Hearing the Islamic Calls to Prayer five times per day or live together with other Muslims. It is more natural. I even did Ramadan there. There is a special context and atmosphere. I do not want to deny my western identity, but I would like to live in a Muslim country to better live my religion.⁴⁶

Asya would also give a different education to her daughters in the future. Her parents were different, because at the time it was more important for them to blend into the French society. They never obliged her to wear the veil. Still, when she started wearing it, she had seen the satisfaction in their faces. She wants her daughters to wear the veil and see its importance. For that she will give them the necessary education about her religion by explaining them Islam, giving the right values and transferring the message. She identifies herself as a Muslim, so she feels important that her daughters also should practice the religion and wear the veil.

Asya follows her religious practices very thoroughly and seeks for guidance from the Quran. She sees Islam as the centre of her life and believes that she has gone through a journey to practice her religion deeply. Wearing the veil has caused her difficulties in the

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

society, but she is still glad to wear it. Asya feels discrimination from the French state and people towards the Muslim community and this makes her want to leave France in the future. At the same time she would feel more comfortable living in a Muslim country to practice her religion better.

4.2. Najiba: Being used to French lifestyle

The 24-year-old Najiba is the younger sister of Asya. Najiba has the same religious background as her, apart from the fact that Najiba is not veiled. Najiba at certain points admits some exceptions from the Prophet's words. She is not wearing the veil, but also she listens to music. She says that music is actually forbidden from Islam, because the messages of music do not always fit with the messages of religion and it is said not to be good for the heart. At the same time she respects her religious principles and values. In Najiba's mind the most important religious practice is her faith and after that every Muslim should also follow the prayers to call up to the Lord and follow the Ramadan. To her the fundamental principle of her religion is to believe in God. She calls out: "Thank you God for creating me!" Apart from all, she sees Islam religion as very complex:

Every Muslim, whether old or young, has still some courses to learn. To understand the Quran profoundly you need to read many exegetes. When you read the Quran in a serious way, there should be only one interpretation. My religion is spiritual, maybe a bit philosophical, but mainly spiritual.⁴⁷

Najiba admits that wearing the veil is an important practice and that it is a matter of modesty. It means for her that a woman reserves herself to God and hides her feminine parts from the vulgar looks of men. That is important about the veil for her. She adds that in France the veil does not have the same importance as in Muslim countries. In the French society a veiled woman is seen as married, but in Maghreb, she says, if a woman does not wear the veil, men will stare at her because they do not respect her:

So for me after growing up in France, having been used to the fashion, wearing the veil is a very hard decision to make. When you wear it once, you wear it your whole life. It is not a game to play. I really hope that one day I will be able to wear the veil. I have already tried it on several times to see how it fits me, but I think I still lack courage a bit. I do not feel

⁴⁷ Interview no 2 with Najiba, 23 January 2014, Lyon, France

ready yet. But at the same time I am afraid that the moment will never come. I have told myself that it is between me and God. When he wants me to start wearing it, I will.⁴⁸

At the same time, Najiba wears the veil when she does the daily prayers. But she follows this religious practice at her own house, only by herself, when other people are not looking at her. Going to the mosque is different for her, as she feels a bit hypocrite going there. Women are obliged to wear the veil said by the Quran, but she knows that others will see her wearing the veil in the mosque, but not outside and that for her feels hypocrite. She has been to the mosque a few times, but every time she felt bad with herself.

Although Najiba does not understand how her sister manages to follow all the rules and practices of the Prophet and the Quran, she feels very thankful to her too. Often her sister wakes her up in the morning for the first prayer, at 5 am in the morning. For Najiba it is complicated to wake up as it cuts the sleep. As she works during the day, she cannot do her prayers either:

France is a secular country and society. I think it is also important to respect that. So when I arrive back home in the evening I catch up the prayers I missed during the day.⁴⁹

Najiba says that she can understand the purpose of the laws introduced in 2004 and 2011. As there is no official religion in the State and the Islam culture does not exist, then in her opinion it is normal to forbid certain things and practices. She would tell quite frankly to the people who complain about the laws: “*Au revoir!* [Goodbye!]”

Even though France is a secular country, Najiba does not like the fact how the Islam religion is seen in the French society in general. She is worried that everyone sees Islam only in the women who cover their heads and that everyone is put in the same category. She complains that when French people see her Arabic name, she does not have the same chances of employment that all other French people have. She has already got some negative comments because of her name:

I opened the door and left. The society is against the Arabs. An Emilie is better than Karim! I want to leave France in the future. I do not feel good here. I think it is hard to build a stable life here. I would like to live in a country, where they look for my competences, not my name.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Najiba does not see herself going back to Algeria, but she would consider some other Muslim countries like Morocco, Lebanon, Qatar or Dubai in the future. She doesn't yet have a clear plan, as she is at the moment going to university and doing an internship in France.

Marriage for her plays a huge role in her life and she sees herself only marrying a Muslim in the future. She does not care about the nationality of the future-husband, but she wants the person to follow the same religious behaviours and practices as herself. For her there is no other way. She also believes that she will be giving her children the important education about Islam and its practices, but she would not push her daughter(s) to wear the veil as she is not wearing it even herself. At the same time, she would still explain them the importance of it.

For Najiba her religious practices are important and she follows them daily. On the other hand, after growing up in France she believes it is normal to follow the local rules and modify some of the practices a bit. Najiba sees the importance of the veil, but has not yet found the full motivation to start wearing it. She does not like how the French state perceives the Muslim community and categorises all Muslims, so it makes her want to leave France in the future.

4.3. Mathilde: Following the religious path

Mathilde is a married 29-year-old and is the only respondent who was born in France into a French family. Her family is protestant and she grew up being a believer. She says that Islam came to her life to complete her religious journey. A lot of messages in the Quran were aligned with the ideas she had already had before. So eight years ago she announced to her parents the decision to change the religion. In her words, her parents accepted her new religion easily, as they understood it was part of her path.

Islam for me means the actions of adoration towards the God. This is how a Muslim shows its faith. Every Muslim should follow the Five Pillars of Islam. For me these are the most important practices of my religion. Islam is a religion that completes the messages of all the other existing religions, it is not controversial to them. Islam religion places the woman in the centre and she is considered as a princess. With Islam, a woman finds its dignity and

honour. A woman in Islam is seen as the light, modesty and beauty. A woman is created next to men to complete them. It is written in the Quran: “They [women] are clothing for you and you are clothing for them [women].”⁵¹

For Mathilde the Quran represents the words of the God, transmitted by the Prophet Muhammad through the intermediary Angel Gabriel. Reading the Quran regularly and learning it is part of her religious practices. She does not have problems reading the Quran in Arabic, as she has learnt the language for 2.5 years, but she also reads it in French.

Mathilde says that she has always been modest as it was part of her religious education as protestant. In her words, modesty is a common value in every religion and all religious practices should be done with great modesty and shyness. She brings the example of Mary, the mother of Jesus, who is always shown with a veil in the Christian religion.

I started wearing the veil 2.5 years ago. It was a personal choice for me. Beyond the obligation of the religion, it became a need when my faith became stronger. Now I wear it every day and I feel naked without it. Although, it was a lot harder for my parents to accept the veil than the religion itself.⁵²

At the same time Mathilde is convinced that the veil is not a religious symbol, but a religious practice and need. In her mind, she does not wear it to show the rest of the world that she is a Muslim. For her the veil is an expression of modesty and a wish to preserve herself from the temptation men and women have towards each other:

After starting to wear the veil, I feel good because I feel protected with my values and principles. People should stop seeing the veil as an obligation, rather as a way for the women to protect themselves.⁵³

Mathilde is quite negative towards the laws against the Muslim community in the French society. She says that in France Muslims are systematically the subjects of law. When in 2004 French state prohibited the veil from public schools, for her it meant that other girls like her [to whom the veil is a personal choice] either need take it off or they quit school. Also she disagrees strongly with the societal influence towards Muslim women who are obliged to quit the veil at work:

⁵¹ Interview no 4 with Mathilde, 27 January 2014, Lyon, France

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

In France it is seen in a bad way when women work in a public space with their veil on. I know this situation myself, as in the beginning I also had to take it off at work. It was very hard to live like that. Now I would never take my veil off for a job. I want the employers to see what is inside my head, not on top of my head. If my competences are ignored because of the headscarf, then this is injustice! People in the society who oblige women to take off their veils are the same fundamentalists as the ones who oblige women to wear them.⁵⁴

All in all, Mathilde still sees French state as her home and feels fully as a French citizen. She does not think about moving to a Muslim country in the future, because she loves her country [France]: “I think I can be a Muslim and French at the same time. It is up to me to make sure my rights are respected, my place is here.”

For Mathilde marriage has always been very important and she sees Islam and the veil as a protection of the sacred marriage. Now she is married to Muslim man, who gets along well with her family. Also their future perspective is bright, as they are waiting a baby.

Mathilde decided to convert herself to Islam because she sees it as part of her religious path. She follows all Islamic practices and feels that the religion gives Muslim women their dignity. For her wearing the veil is a need to preserve herself and show her modest behaviour. Mathilde does not have any intentions of leaving France and feels that she just needs to cope with the challenges Muslims are facing in the French society. She is married and expecting a baby.

4.4. Nesrine: Understanding the secularism

Nesrine is 24 years old and she is a Tunisian who has moved to France two years ago after she married her French husband. She defines herself as a believer towards the God, but a non-practicing Muslim. She feels that Islam for her is more of a heritage from home. She says that it is logical that her parents are Muslims and so she was born as a Muslim. She does practice Ramadan, but does not wear the veil, neither does the prayers:

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

I think I lack a bit of motivation and also I do not know how to do them. Honestly saying, I am part of the majority who has not had a big religious education. The first time I visited a mosque was 3 years ago in Birmingham, England. As a Muslim we are told to believe in other religions as well, but all the other religions do not understand us completely, so I think it makes me a bit more tolerant than the others.⁵⁵

Nesrine says that her way of showing the God she believes in him is doing Ramadan. That is a very important practice for her, as it makes her feel secured and part of the community. It is not even so much about religion to her. She admits not having read the Quran fully, but when she was younger she used to read more, especially during Ramadan. In her opinion the language used in the Quran makes Muslims believe more. She says it is very poetic, even the big poets do not know the meaning of all words and that until today, Muslims do not understand everything. She thinks that there is no human who can read all the words and phrases from the Quran. On the other hand, she adds, no human can create such structures of sentences.

She also believes that wearing the veil is not mentioned in the Quran and is not an obliged religious practice. Nesrine says that God does insist wearing decent clothes and not showing certain parts of your body, what may provoke the sexuality of men, but according to her, a woman can practice her religion without putting the veil:

When I was young, I wanted to wear the veil, all my friends wanted. But my mother didn't let me: "Don't hide your life", she said. I have a friend who started wearing the veil, but she was a girl like me, more liberal. In Tunisia it is very common. But if you wear the veil, you cannot be that liberal anymore. She needed to hide her personal life, so she got a bit lost. Everyone was telling her how she cannot do this or that, so she took off the veil five or six months after she started wearing it. I think it happens to girls who do not have the right reasons to start wearing it. Now she has got married and become a mother, so she started wearing the veil again. As she had done a few bad things in her life, she probably decided to wear the veil again to put the things in order.⁵⁶

Nesrine says that although she is not wearing the veil, then she is not going to say an infinite "no". In her words, the veil has also become the fashion, it is chic and pretty and for some people it is not about religion anymore.

⁵⁵ Interview no 3 with Nesrine, 24 January 2014, Lyon, France

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

In her opinion, there is a lot of controversy about the veil in France. She says that French people and society are not very accepting towards the topic. At the same time, she sees that it is necessary to follow the local laws and respect the State and its citizens. If some Muslims do not like the situation, in her opinion they can return to their home countries. Although Nesrine arrived to France after the laws [about wearing the veil in public places] were introduced, she had been shocked about the French society before:

During my first holidays in France, I saw five or six women wearing *burqa* on the streets of Lyon, something I had never seen in Tunisia before. In Tunisia, girls are not even allowed to go to university or work while wearing the veil.⁵⁷

As Nesrine moved to France to live with her husband, she imagines her future life there. Before Nesrine got married, her husband had to convert himself to Islam because the male always needs to be Muslim in order to marry. For Nesrine the conversion is just a piece of paper and does not say a lot. She says: “My husband is a believer, he believes in the same values as in all religions. He even tried to do Ramadan with me!”

Also Nesrine’s present and future life is happy, as a few months ago she and her husband became parents to a small boy.

Nesrine does not practice Islam, apart from Ramadan, but she still identifies herself as a Muslim. She does believe in God and sees her faith as an important part of her life. Nesrine sees many reasons behind the importance of the veil, but she does not agree that it is obligatory for a Muslim woman and she is not planning to wear it in the near future. Nesrine believes that it is normal for the French country to have its own laws to organise the society and she is planning to stay in France with her husband and newly born baby.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the French Muslims' identities in the French society through the process of narrative engagement among young Muslim women in France. As the Muslim community is very often seen only through the eyes of the French state and the society, then the author felt necessary to explore more the side of the Muslims by researching materials written from their point of view and also getting insides from the young women experiencing identity-building in France themselves.

The thematic content of the narratives brings in four key points of the identity-building among the four Muslim women. The theme of personal religious practices is constantly present in each narrative and is closely connected to the importance of the veil. The ones that wear the veil also follow other religious practices more thoroughly, but in the end all respondents agree on the general understanding of the importance of the veil. The influence of the French state and society also plays a huge role in how the Muslim women perceive their lives at the moment in France and what future perspectives it gives. Finally, future perspectives give a short overview of each respondent and her plans whether in France or abroad.

Religious practices

Religious practices seem to play a huge role in most of respondents' lives, apart from Nesrine who defines herself as non-practicing. Theoretically there is a framework of obligations, which guides the Muslims through everyday lives by carrying out the Five Pillars of Islam. Mathilde and Asya have said, that they organise their lives according to the religion, while it is interesting to mention that Mathilde only converted to Islam eight years ago from Protestantism. For Najiba all practices are very important, but she seems to put her work and French lifestyle first and modifies the practices accordingly, which contradicts a bit the idea of Muslims putting their faith first. For example she saves the daily prayers for the evening, as many Muslim women in France seem to do based on Killian's research in 2007. Asya and Mathilde follow the Five Pillars of Islam thoroughly, among which the most important is the faith and then come the prayers. Although Nesrine does not practice her religion fully, she still does Ramadan, one of the Five Pillars. The Quran seems to be important for all four, for example Nesrine believes that it must have

been the God who ever wrote it because it includes such a language that cannot be created by a human. Religious education from home was mentioned in three narratives. Asya, Najiba and Mathilde got it from their parents, among whom Mathilde initially had the protestant education and later learnt Islam all by herself. Nesrine admits not having a great religious education. Mathilde and Asya wear the veil and see it as part of their religious journey, while Najiba is hoping to wear the veil in the near future and Nesrine is not saying a definite no, but pushing it far away into the future.

Importance of the veil

The veil for the four Muslim woman seems to have a similar importance and meaning – it is about preserving from men to keep out the attraction between genders and showing shyness as self-respect (*Sharam*). Asya, Mathilde and Najiba all agree on the obligation of wearing the veil, but they also say that a Muslim girl can show her modest behaviour and proper religious practices without it. Najiba understands the necessity of the veil and knows that a good Muslim should be wearing it, but she is afraid to make the decision as it will affect her whole life. Only Nesrine disagrees with the obligation of wearing the veil as in her opinion it is not stated in the Quran. She also adds that lately the veil has become fashion and is not so much connected to the religion anymore. Najiba and Asya both agree that in the Western world the veil brings confusion and has become a symbol of religion, unlike in the Muslim countries where the veil is women's way to gain respect from men. Asya sees the veil as a religious symbol and accepts it, while Mathilde explains that she does not wear the veil to show she is a Muslim, but for her the necessity is solely meant for self-preservation. Both of them emphasise that they would not take their veil off for a job, as a big part of French Muslim women community do based on Killian's study conducted in 2007. At the same time Mathilde admits, that she needed to take the veil off at work in the beginning and that it was a very hard way to live.

Influence of the French state and society

All four respondents agree that the French society's and state's influence is quite strong on the religious practices and Islam in general. It came out from the study that the women who practice their religion the most, Asya and Mathilde, also expect more tolerance from the French state, while Nesrine and Najiba understand better the necessity of local laws

and principles and would rather suggest the people who do not like the rules to leave France. In Asya's and Mathilde's point of view the laws about wearing veil in the public space in France have created more aggression towards the Muslim community than good in the State. Mathilde really disagrees to the law in 2004 restricting all religious symbols from school, because in her opinion it makes Muslim girls decide between their education and the veil. Asya does not like the law introduced in 2011, because in her opinion the people who used to wear the face veil, were such a small minority and now all veiled women are more in the public's eye because of it. When talking about how Islam generally is visualised in France, then everyone apart from Nesrine dislikes how the Muslim community is seen and how all Muslim women are categorised in the same way. As Nesrine is not born in France, it makes her experience the newest and as she is the least practicing, it makes her the most French-sided. As many women in the book "*Les filles voilées parlent*", Mathilde and Najiba complain that sometimes people with Muslim background struggle to get jobs, for Najiba it is because of her Arabic name and for Mathilde because of the veil. Both of them agree that the employers should rather look for knowledge inside people's heads and see their competences, not only look into the external factors.

Future perspectives

Marriage seems to be an important topic in everyone's life, as it is counted to be part of the *Sharam*. Two of the respondents are already married – Nesrine and Mathilde. The sisters Asya and Najiba both talk about marriage on a high level and agree that their future husband should be a Muslim to share the same Islamic values. Mathilde, although being a French citizen, has married a Muslim man, while Nesrine, born in a Muslim country, has married a Frenchman. Both of the married women either have a child already or are expecting one soon. This leaves a general impression that family is very important in the Muslim women's lives. Mathilde, Najiba and Asya all promise to give their children religious education, while Asya and Mathilde would really like to see their daughters wearing the veil. Najiba says that the decision should be done by the children themselves. The sisters both would like to leave France in the future. Asya's wish is to live in a Muslim country to practice her religion better and she would see herself returning to Algeria. Najiba on the other hand, would not go back to Algeria, but would like to live in another Muslim country, not in France. Mathilde and Nesrine see their lives in France, as they

have already started their families there. Mathilde does not see a reason to leave, because she feels as a full French citizen and Nesrine only moved to France a few years back for her husband.

Conclusion

Islam in France has been and still is a heated topic among the French politicians and the State. It is visible from the theoretical part that neither France is satisfied with the current state, nor is the Muslim community living in the country. In order for the two parties to live together, it needs more effort from the side of the State, but also from the Muslim community and in this study especially – the Muslim women. Muslim women in France have become the symbols of the religion, but in order to modify that, Muslims also need to continue adapting more to the local reality to avoid confrontations.

The four life stories of young Muslim women in France collected for this study revealed narratives of personalised opinions towards how they perceive the French society, the Islam religion and practices that go along with it. Even though all four young women are currently living in Lyon in France and are part of the French culture, then each one of them still identifies herself as Muslim. The main topics analysed were the religious practices of young Muslim women and the closely connected importance of the veil. These topics gave different insights and made the author understand that there does not exist only one level of faith, but every life story is different. Every woman has her own way to perceive her religion. The other two important topics were to measure the influence of the French state and society on the Muslim community and the religion and based on the previous, what are the future perspectives of the respondents. Again each woman had her own idea how positive or negative the French state is towards them and accordingly they have some future plans to meet with their own current situation.

The study was able to thoroughly explore the Muslim women identity-building in France through the theoretical framework, but also through the four narratives. The life stories of the interviewees show clearly that Muslims may practice their religion differently and still be identified by their religion. Also the feelings every woman had towards the French society varies a lot and one common ground cannot be found. At the same time, the Muslim women in France are able live their religion fully if wanted and have a Muslim identity. The French society just faces more challenges and difficulties that the women are willing to overcome.

The most important outcome of the study is that no life story is the same and it is not possible to bring out common conclusions among the four stories. In order to really measure the Muslim women's identity-building topic in France, a future study should

include more human resources and have a lot more respondents. With the current study though, it is possible to highlight how special and valuable each story is and how much perspective one single story can give in the understanding of this topic. What is sure, the topic of Muslim community in France and its problems is not solved and for sure needs more attention from the French government. At the same time, I would encourage Muslims to also try to integrate more and find a compromise with what is offered to them.

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Kokkuvõte

Mosleminaised ja nende identiteedid Lyonis, Prantsusmaal

Bakalaureusetöö eesmärgiks oli uurida mosleminainte identiteete Prantsusmaal läbi varasema teoreetilise materjali ning nelja eluloo põhjal välja tuua, kuidas mosleminaised sulanduvad Prantsuse ühiskonda. Neli põhilist temaatikat, mida töös käsitleti, olid religioossed tavad, loori olulisus, Prantsuse riigi ja ühiskonna mõju ning tulevikuperspektiiv mosleminainte seas Prantsusmaal. Töö annab esialgu ülevaate sellest, kuidas suhtub Prantsuse riik moslemite kogukonda ning millised probleemid hetkel nende kahe poole vahel valitsevad. Seejärel teeb autor ülevaate mosleminainte religioossetest tavadest vastavalt neljale uuritavale temaatikale ning võrdleb seda nelja narratiiviga mosleminainte elulugudest. Teooria ja narratiivide alusel annab autor ülevaate, kuidas noored mosleminaised Prantsusmaal oma moslemiidentiteete loovad ning igapäevaselt elavad. Autori jaoks oli oluline mõista sügavuti mosleminainte elusid – nende religioosseid tavasid ning tulevikuperspektiive vastavalt Prantsuse riigi mõjudele.

Antud bakalaureusetöös on kasutatud kvalitatiivset analüüsi ning materjalide kogumiseks intervjuumeetodit. Kuna antud uurimuses oli oluline mõista inimeste elulugusid sügavuti, siis autor otsustas intervjuuerida nelja noort mosleminaint Lyonis, Prantsusmaal. Kasutatud intervjuumeetod on poolstruktureeritud, et jätta ruumi lisaküsimustele ning intervjuueritavate lugudele. Seejärel on kõik intervjuud transkribeeritud, et omada paremat ülevaadet, kuna intervjuud toimusid prantsuse keeles. Peale transkribeerimist kirjutas autor igast intervjuueritavast inglise keelse eluloo, et hilisemat analüüsi paremini formuleerida. Selleks et elulugusid analüüsida ning neid teoreetilise materjaliga võrrelda kasutas autor narratiivanalüüsi, kirjutatud nelja keskse temaatika alusel.

Kõige olulisem järeldus antud tööst on see, et ükski elulugu ei ole samasugune ning on peaaegu võimatu tuua välja ühtseid järeldusi neljast narratiivist. Edasiseks uurimuseks oleks vaja rohkem inimressurssi ning laiemat valimit, et päriselt mosleminainte identiteetide kohta Prantsusmaal põhjapidavaid järeldusi tuua. Antud uurimusega saab aga esile tõsta kui erilised ja väärtuslikud antud elulood on ning kui palju üks elulugu võib anda arusaama vastavast teemast.

Appendixes

Annex 1. Interview questions

Introduction

Thank you very much for joining me for the interview. In my thesis, I am looking for a better overview of the practices of Islam among Muslim women in Lyon. In the finalised work I am going to analyse every interview deeply and will write a life story based on your answers. In order to do that I am going to ask you about your feelings towards your religion and the religious practices in the context of France. I want to understand your point of view towards your religious practices and the veil, whether you wear it or not. Is that okay with you?

I am very grateful for your time and effort to share your ideas and views with me. I want you to feel free to share all your thoughts that come to your head during our talk.

The interview is confidential. I will only use your answers to create the life stories for the thesis. I will use your first name in order to make the difference among other interviewers. The interview will happen in French and will be recorded. Are you fine with it? If you are ready, we can start.

Name:

Associations/Hobbies:

Age:

Email:

Studies:

Date:

1. What is the family and the religious background of the Muslim women in Lyon:

The first part of the interview will be about your background to understand how your practices of religion have formed.

Are you born in Lyon? If yes, how long have your parents/grandparents lived here? If no, how long have you lived here yourself?

From which country do your origins come from? How does your country of origin see the immigration towards Western countries?

Were you born in a Muslim family? If not, when did you convert into Islam? What was the main influence for this decision?

What is your marital status (married/single/etc.)?

Do you have children?

Who do you live with (alone/parents/siblings/husband/etc.)?

Do your female family relatives wear the veil?

2. How do Muslim women see and practice the religion of Islam and the traditions that go with it:

This second and the longest part of the interview will be about your understanding of Islam and its practices.

What does faith mean to you? What does Islam mean to you?

What kind of differences do you see between Islam and other religions? Please bring examples.

Has the Western world changed Islam in your opinion? How?

What is the role of Coran in Islam? Do people interpret Coran in the same way? What does a personalised interpretation depend on?

How much do you follow Coran on a daily basis? Which are the other religious texts you follow?

Have you met Muslim women who interpret Coran differently than you? Give examples.

Which are the most important traditions/habits according to Islam? Why?

Do you practice praying and how often?

Do you wear the veil? If yes, how do you wear it (always/outdoors/etc.)?

How did you decide to wear/not to wear the veil? What was the main influence for this decision?

How important in your opinion are the veiling practices in a Muslim woman's life? Can it be seen as the most important one?

What is hijab for you? Is it a type of a veil or something else?

How does a Muslim woman choose its type of veil (*khimar, burqa, hijab*, etc.)? Can the type change throughout the life?

How is it possible to interpret Coran in a way that veiling is not obligatory?

How much is wearing the veil connected to following the Coran and women's own wish?

3. How do Muslim women in Lyon generally see the practices of the veil:

The third part will ask mainly about your point of views towards the veil. The will be questions will be general and also French specific.

Are the practices of the veil different in Muslim countries and in France? If yes, why?

Are you wearing the veil differently when you are in France or in a Muslim country (for example your country of origin)? Why?

Are the practices of the veil different in France compared to the other Western countries?

How has the view towards women wearing the veil changed in the Western world?

Did the laws in 2004 about wearing veils in public schools or in 2011 about the restriction of covering the face in public change the society in France? If yes, how?

Who decides if the woman should wear the veil or not? Did your family direct you towards it or not?

How do you see a situation when a woman wears a veil in a Muslim country, but quits it when coming to the western world? Why?

Do you know any situations where a Muslim woman decided to quit the veil? What did this situation depend on?

Have you changed your opinions towards wearing the veil? If yes, how?

Would you like your daughter(s) to be wearing the veil in the future? Why?

4. *(Only for women who wear the veil)* How do the Muslim women in Lyon feel while wearing the veil:

In the last part of the interview I want to understand your feelings towards the world and yourself when wearing the veil.

How old were you when you started wearing the veil?

What type of veil do you wear (*niqab, hijab, khimar, etc.*)? How did you decide on that?

How did you feel during the period of time when you just started wearing the veil?

Do you wear the veil with pleasure? How has wearing the veil changed your life?

What kind of emotions do you get when you see women who do not veil?

Do you feel as part of the Western world?

Is the society rather positive or negative here in France towards the veil?

How did you feel when the laws were voted in France in 2004 and 2011? Do you agree with the law or not?

How would you feel when you would stop wearing the veil one day?

Have you thought about quitting the veil? For which reasons? What kept you back?

Are there any reasons for quitting the veil in the future?

Conclusion

My questions are over, thank you very much for your time and answers! Do you have anything else to add? Would you like to get a copy of my final work?

Again, thank you very much that you found the time to answer my questions. It is a big help for me and my thesis.

Annex 2. Life stories

Life story of Asya

Asya was my course mate during my exchange semester in Lyon. As soon as I decided to write my thesis about the current topic, I went to her to ask for advice, as she was one of the two veiled girls in my class. Asya was very willing to help and even before we had the interview, we sat down and talked about her religion which gave me many perspectives for the interviews. She was a big help for me.

What struck me the most was when we met for an interview last January. She apologised in the beginning that she needs 5 minutes to do one of her daily prayers. So she took out her small blanket, put it on the floor of the classroom and started doing her prayer. It was the first time in my life actually seeing a prayer conducted so close in front of my eyes.

What is more, she was willing to miss a class just for me to finish all the interview questions. She answered thoroughly and gave me lots of background information. After contacting her back this year, she was so pleased to hear from me and told me everything that has happened to her in the meantime. It has been a pleasure to work with her.

Islam is the centre of my life. First comes my religion and then I do other things according to what is allowed and what not. Most important are the Five Pillars of Islam. My practices of Islam are done based on the faith I have, faith for me is the core of Islam. The prayers are the second most important in Islam. But it is never enough to just follow the Five Pillars. A practicing Muslim should always give a little bit more, put a little more effort.

For example, you can do more than 5 prayers per day or fast 3 days per week, so it is like multiple Ramadan. You make your own journey towards the God. It is always important to look for God in everything you do.

The Quran for me is the most important text to follow as it is written by the God. All Muslims are responsible for themselves of how often to read the Quran. It is a personal effort to make every day. Some people even learn it by heart. If something is said in the Quran, it needs to be followed, it is like a law of Islam.

I tell myself: “Go towards the Quran, go towards the God, go towards the message!”

It is not possible to interpret the Quran in different ways, it has a unified message. The interpretation of the Quran should be very clear to everyone and it should be the same in France, Morocco and in any other country. Yes there are some differences between groups and movements in the Islam religion. I am Sunnite and we follow Sunnah next to the Quran, but for example Shiites do not follow Sunnah that much. Sunnah for me is like a model of life – Prophet has written down all the things that are allowed and prohibited.

And of course education is very important. Especially for the Muslims who are not born in the Muslim world. In the schools of the Muslim countries they actually have courses

about religion, they study Arabic and usually there are even separate schools for girls and boys. Here in France it is different, there is usually no religion education at school, so the family needs to prepare their children to discover Islam and Islam figures. At a certain age, parents should also prepare their daughter(s) how a Muslim woman should dress and what should be her attitude. Parents' education is extremely important.

My mother never told me to wear the veil. Her journey is a bit complicated. She has lived at a different time. When my parents moved to France from Algeria it was more important to try to integrate to the society. So in the beginning my mother didn't wear the veil in France, but she did when she went back to Algeria. It last quite a while until she started wearing the veil properly in France. Now she wears the veil every day after I started wearing it.

But I would give a different education to my daughters in the future. My parents are different, they never obliged me to do anything. Still, when I started wearing the veil, I saw the satisfaction in their faces. I want my daughters to wear the veil. I will start their education by explaining them Islam, giving the right values and transferring the message. Our identity is Muslim and Muslim women need to wear the veil.

I was 22 years old when I started wearing the veil. It's not that I didn't want to wear it before. I did. But somehow I never found the motivation completely, although I was sure that one day I will wear it. I went back to university after a while and saw a girl there who had just started wearing the veil 2-3 months before. And this made me think how she has come to the point of wearing it. I had been waiting for the right moment and she was there, so she took me to the mosque and let's say she helped me to practice my religion more. When I was next to her I realised that she doesn't have many things more than me.

"We are both Muslim and we both do our prayers. Why am I not wearing the veil?" I told myself, "Let's do this!"

I put on the veil one time, I went outside and I never took it off! I understood that if I had asked myself too many questions, I would have never started wearing it. So I can say she had an influence on me, but an indirect one. She has had a great importance in my life, we still see each other often.

I think for me wearing the veil is an outcome of a journey. I always wanted to wear it, but I was afraid what the others will say, etc. But I know that the veil will satisfy the God, it is written in the Quran. So when I manage to wear the veil every day despite the difficulties, I am content because I manage to please the God.

The veil is much more than just a headscarf, it is an attitude, expression and behaviour. You are showing something with your veil. When someone sees me with the veil, it is visible that I am Muslim. It is like a language. Unfortunately, people here in France often see it as a symbol of a married woman. Yes, there are cases when people start wearing the veil after they get married, but it can also happen other way around that they lose the veil after the wedding. The way people wear the veil can also evolve, evolve higher or lower. It means that some women start directly wearing a big veil and then slowly lose some parts, for example start wearing *Khimar*. On the other hand, there are Muslim women like me.

My veiling style has evolved higher over the past 6 years. I didn't want to put a big veil right away. I only started wearing a headscarf when I came to Lyon and I changed the style when I went to visit Algeria. I started wearing *Khimar* and later instead of trousers, I am wearing skirts. But the change was not only in style, my faith evolved when I visited Algeria. I started feeling Islam more strongly, I went back to my roots.

It is hard to say whether I am Algerian or French. I was born in France, I went to school here and I speak French. At the same time it is visible that I am Arabic. So it is important to say also that I have Arabic roots. It is not impossible to be a Muslim in the Western world, it depends how you feel it yourself. But I do not hide, that especially after visiting Algeria, I want to leave France. I would like to live in a Muslim country to live better my religion. It is very important for me. For example hearing the Islamic Calls to Prayer five times per day or live together with other Muslims. It is more natural. In the future I have a plan to leave and go live in a Muslim country.

In France, I am obliged to take off my veil when I take a picture for my passport or identity card. Imagine when I need to show my passport anywhere where a man looks at it, I do not feel good. And the law in 2011 changed a lot for me. Although I have never worn *Niqab*, I felt attacked. There were already problems because of the law in 2004 about wearing veils in schools. But this law didn't do anything else than just adding racism and discrimination. It gave me even more wish to leave France. The people in France do not understand Islam and I often hear remarks. It is not nice. While in Muslim countries many women wear veils because then they have more respect from men.

In general, the Western world has had an impact on the practices of Islam. The practices are not the same anymore as they were during the time of the Prophet. A lot of Muslim people nowadays say that they are Muslim but they do not practice. They say that they believe the God, but they do not pray or do the Ramadan. This cannot be the question of interpretation. The message of the Quran is the same, but sometimes people play with the words and disagree with the meaning. But it is rather about the faith they have and how much effort are they willing to put in their practices.

And if you see the people who do not practice a lot, it is contradictory to the values of Islam. But a lot of those people went to Western schools and they never received the education. When Muslims drink or smoke, they say that it depends on the words, that some things are not prohibited, but rather not recommended. In general these kind of people do not have a good knowledge of Islam or they haven't yet found their faith.

To talk about veil more specifically, it is written in the Quran that women are obliged to wear the veil. It is not a choice. But it very often depends on the faith and efforts. A lot of women say that veil is not obliged because of this or that, but normally there should be no questions to ask, no one should mix the Quran with their personal opinion. On the other hand, it is not written very clearly in Quran, so this is why it causes a lot of contradiction. There are a lot of arguments between the texts and knowledge. But these are usually the people who do not wear the veil. This is their "interpretation". For example my sister doesn't wear the veil.

But in the end I am not the one to judge, as I didn't wear the veil 6 years ago either. In the religion actually Muslims are not allowed to judge at all. This is why I say that every person has its own journey.

Life story of Najiba

I met Najiba thanks to her sister Asya. Najiba was very eager to meet me. We went to sit in a café and although we had never seen each other before, she opened up completely. She told me everything she thinks about her religion. It was interesting to see how her and her sister mind-sets are very different.

She and her sister both have a strong belief in God, but at the same time the way they see the world around them varies a lot. Najiba doesn't wear the veil, she doesn't follow all the religious guidance from Sunnah and she seems a bit rebellious towards the French community. Her opinions are also stronger.

It seemed that she was very relieved after our talk. She told me that I was the first person, apart from her family, who she has ever spoken about her religion so deeply. She was very amazed how an international is so curious, while the French people do not care. I got a lot of insights about Muslims in France from her.

When I was a child and Christians celebrated Christmas, I didn't understand why my family wasn't celebrating. It was not easy at the time. But luckily my parents taught me Islam and the religious concept. I think that God cares about our well-being on Earth. Islam is a religion of peace and love. It is the most important to respect the God, that's the fundamental principal.

"Thank you God for creating me!"

It is necessary to respect the values and religious principles. If we do not respect them, we do not have any rights. Afterwards we have the prayers to call up to the Lord, Ramadan is of course important and in general every Muslim needs to follow the Five Pillars of Islam. The Quran is like a guide through all of that.

At the same time Islam is very-very complex, it takes years to learn it. Every Muslim, whether old or young, has still some courses to learn. To understand the Quran profoundly, you need to read many exegetes. When you read the Quran in a serious way, there should be only one interpretation. My religion is spiritual, maybe a bit philosophical, but mainly spiritual.

There are no big differences between Islam and other religions. We all believe in the same God. The only difference is that for example certain things are allowed for Christians that in Islam are prohibited. Christians are more flexible with the religion we can say. For example in Islam girls should not be outside in the evening. I have gone out during the evenings, but never at night. Parties for us are prohibited, the opposite sex will see you and this is how you get tempted. I don't want to get tempted. I have never smoked or drunk alcohol. If you explore these things, you will be miserable after. But I am happy in my life, I have my family and friends.

My parents are very liberal in a way. They have never obliged me for anything. For example they never told me or my sister to wear the veil. She decided wearing it on her own. On the other hand I know a family where they obliged the daughter to start wearing the veil when she was 15 years old. The results were that she started having behaviours

that a Muslim shouldn't have. Me on the other side, I do not wear the veil, but I act like a Muslim should. I respect everyone, I am tolerant, even with the things that are prohibited in our religion.

Wearing the veil is important of course, it is a matter of modesty. It means that you reserve yourself to God and hide your feminine parts from the vulgar looks of men. That's what is important about the veil. So for me after growing up in France, having been used to the fashion, wearing the veil is a very hard decision to make. When you wear it once, you wear it your whole life. It is not a game to play.

I really hope that one day I will be able to wear the veil. I have already tried it on several times to see how it fits me, but I think I still lack courage a bit. I do not feel ready yet. But at the same time I am afraid that the moment will never come. I have a veiled friend who asks me all the time why I am not wearing it. But I do not know what to answer her, I know it is important to wear it! I do not have the answer to it! I have told myself that it is between me and God. When he wants me to start wearing it, I will.

I do wear the veil when I do the prayers. But I at my own house, only by myself. When other people are not looking at me. At the mosque it is different. I feel a bit hypocrite going there. Women are obliged to wear the veil, but people know that I normally don't wear it. Other women who go pray in the mosque, also wear the veil inside, but not me. I have gone to the mosque a few times, but I felt bad. I do not want to be hypocrite with my own religion.

It is also what my sister told me: "You wear it there, but afterwards you take it off!"

My sister really helps me. For example, often she wakes me up in the morning for the first prayer. It is 5 am in the morning. It cuts your sleep, it is hard for me to wake up. But usually when you do it for the God, it should come automatically. During the day I am working, I can't do my prayers either. France is a secular country. I think it is also important to respect that. So when I arrive back home in the evening I catch up the prayers I missed during the day.

I respect my religion and its values but I do not follow Sunnah word by word. At certain points I admit some exceptions. Like the veil for example. But also listening to music. It is actually forbidden, because the messages of music do not always fit with the messages of religion. It is said that music is not good for your heart. My sister doesn't listen to music. Sometimes I do not know how she does it.

It is especially hard in France. There are many cultural products here that are hard to miss. People copy each other a bit. It is hard to restrict everything just because my religion says so. I think in general the Western world has changed how we vision things in Islam. People follow some rules that didn't exist before.

Even the law introduced in France in 2011 I can understand. In a secular country where the Islam culture doesn't exist, it's normal to forbid certain things. And the people who complain, well I would tell them:

"If you do not like the laws of the country you live in, then bye-bye!"

The completely other thing is how the Islam religion is seen in France. Everyone sees that the women who cover their heads or face, that's Islam. They put everyone in the same category, although there's a lot of Muslims who are tolerant and follow their religion in a spiritual way. Islam has nothing to do with extremists, but that's what most of the world thinks.

When I talk about my religion, it is not accepted. When French people see my Arabic name, I do not have the chances that all French people have. Once I already got some comments because of my name. I opened the door and left. They are against the Arabs. An Emilie is better than Karim! I want to leave France. I do not feel good here. I think it is hard to build a stable life here. I would like to leave to a country, where they look for my competences, not my name.

I don't think I will ever go to live in Algeria. But other Muslim countries like Morocco, Lebanon, Qatar or Dubai, they are super good. I do not know yet, we will see! And for marriage is very important. I want to marry a Muslim in the future. I do not care about the nationality, but he needs to follow the same values as in my religion. I could not do it any other way. Or if it would be a Christian for example, it is important that he would convert himself. And I would educate my children about Islam religion. That counts the most! I would not tell my daughter(s) to wear the veil. Especially when I am not wearing it. But I would still let them know that it is important, so one day they could decide for themselves.

Life story of Mathilde

Mathilde was my other veiled course mate in Lyon. Whenever I saw her in the class, she was probably more stylish with her dresses, jackets and head scarfs than any other person in the room. After going to her with my thesis idea, she seemed happy to help and she even tried to find me other respondents.

At the same time, she was the only respondent in the end who didn't agree to meet with me. Although we knew each other already, I guess she didn't feel comfortable of telling me everything from face to face. On the other hand, though our communication online, she has answered all my questions and added a lot of extra from the Quran.

Most importantly, her story is the most incredible in my thesis. She comes from a Christian French family and she was a practicing protestant until she decided to convert herself to Islam eight years ago. I am so glad to be able to analyse such a life story.

Islam for me means the actions of adoration towards the God. This is how a Muslim shows its faith. Every Muslim should follow the Five Pillars of Islam. For me these are the most important practices of my religion. Islam is a religion that completes the messages of all the other existing religions, it is not controversial to them.

Islam religion places the woman in the centre and she is considered as a princess. With Islam, a woman finds its dignity and honour. A woman in Islam is seen as the light,

modesty and beauty. A woman is created next to men to complete them. It is written in the Quran:

“They [*women*] are clothing for you and you are clothing for them [*women*].”

The Quran represents the words of the God, transmitted by the Prophet Muhammad through the intermediary Angel Gabriel. I read the Quran regularly and learn it. In order to understand the Quran completely, I also need to study Hadith and the exegetes. I don't have problems reading the Quran in Arabic, I have learnt Arabic for 2.5 years, but I also read it in French.

For me Islam came to complete my religious journey. It is clear that Muhammad was the last Prophet and the message he transmitted through the Quran won me over. I cannot deny the words of God that came to enlighten my journey. I will never be thankful enough towards the God to have given a sense to my life. A lot of messages in the Quran are aligned with the ideas I even had before.

It was hard and stressing to read the Quran in the beginning and even if I didn't understand everything yet, my heart had changed. On the 15th page in the Quran, I told myself:

“How will I announce my parents that I want to change the religion?”

It took me another 6 months to understand everything completely during which my new religion helped me to open my heart and strengthen my faith. My journey was done all by myself. I did read a lot of comparative theory about Bible and Quran for example, but no one explained me anything.

I announced my parents my decision through a letter 8 years ago. Afterwards we discussed about it and they accepted my new religion easily, as they understood it was part of my path. On the other hand, it was a lot harder for them to accept the veil when I started wearing it 2.5 years ago.

Wearing the veil was a personal choice for me. Beyond the obligation of the religion, it became a need when my faith became stronger. Now I wear it every day and I feel naked without it.

At the same time veil is not a religious symbol for me. I do not wear it to show the rest of the world that I am Muslim. No. The veil is an expression of modesty and a wish to preserve myself from the temptation men and women have towards each other. After starting to wear the veil, I feel good because I feel protected with my values and principles. People should stop seeing the veil as an obligation, rather as a way for the women to protect themselves.

I have always been modest as it was part of my education as protestant as well. Modesty is a common value in every religion. For example Mary, the mother of Jesus, is always shown with a veil in the Christian religion.

But in France Muslims are systematically the subjects of law. When in 2004 they prohibited the veil from public schools, it meant for people like me to whom the veil is a personal choice, that they either take it off if they want to go to school or they quit school.

Also there are many women who are obliged to quit the veil at work. In France it is seen in a bad way when women work in a public space with their veil on. I know this situation myself, as in the beginning I also had to take it off at work. It was very hard to live like

that. Now I would never take my veil off for a job. I want the employers to see what is inside my head, not on top of my head. If my competences are ignored because of the headscarf, then this is injustice!

People who oblige women to take off their veil are the same fundamentalists as the ones who oblige women to wear it.

Still, France is my home and I feel fully as a French citizen. I do not feel like moving to a Muslim country, because I love my country and I think I can be a Muslim and French at the same time. It is up to me to make sure my rights are respected, my place is here.

I got married in France in December 2014 with a Muslim. Marrying a Muslim was an evident choice for me as we share the same values which is essential for a couple. My husband is appreciated by my family and they get along very well.

Life story of Nesrine

I met Nesrine through a common student association which we both took part of. We got along right away and it appeared that we had many Tunisian friends in common. She was very hospitable and even invited me along with some other friends over for lunch, where we tried all the Tunisian specialties.

Nesrine's life is a lot different from the others, as she wasn't born in France. She is Tunisian, but moved to Lyon because she got married to a Frenchman. As she was already married at the time of our interview, I remember the husband calling her in every 10 minutes to rush her to go look at an apartment.

If I compare Nesrine's story to the others, then her lifestyle is very different. She is the most liberal one with the religion and calls herself non-practicing. At the same time she still identifies herself as a Muslim, so it was very interesting to also see her point of view to the religion.

I am a believer which means that I believe in God. Islam at home is a heritage, your parents are Muslims and so you are born as a Muslim. As a Muslim we are told to believe in other religions as well, but all the other religions do not understand us completely, so I think it makes me a bit more tolerant than the others. I do not know all the other religions in depth, but for example I try to read Bible a bit. All the religions believe in the same God.

My way of showing the God I believe in him is doing Ramadan. That is very important for me, it also makes me feel part of the community. It makes me feel secured. I haven't read the whole Quran, but when I was younger I used to read more, especially during Ramadan. The language used in the Quran makes Muslims believe more. It is very poetic, even the big poets don't know the meaning of all the words. Until today, we do not understand everything, there is no human who can read all these words or phrases and on the other hand, no human can create such structures of sentences.

I can say that I am not a practicing Muslim. I do Ramadan, but I do not wear the veil, neither do the prayers. I think I lack a bit of motivation and also I do not know how to do them. The first time I visited a mosque was 3 years ago in Birmingham, England.

Wearing the veil is not mentioned in the Quran. God insists wearing decent clothes and not showing certain parts of your body, what may provoke the sexuality of men. What people do not realise, is that the same principles are mentioned in the Bible. So a woman can practice its religion without putting the veil.

When I was young, I wanted to wear the veil, all my friends wanted. But my mother didn't let me.

"Don't hide your life", she said.

My aunt is veiled, but she is full of joy and not at all reserved. I also have some friends who are veiled, but we get along very well. I have a friend who started wearing the veil, but she was a girl like me. In Tunisia it is very normal to wear skirts and dresses and also go out in the evenings. But if you wear the veil, you cannot do those things anymore. She needed to hide her personal life, so she got a bit lost. Everyone was telling her how she cannot do this or that, so she took off the veil 5 or 6 months after she started wearing it. I think it happens to girls who do not have the right reasons to start wearing it.

Now she has got married and become a mother, so she started wearing the veil again. As she had done a few bad things in her life, she probably decided to wear the veil again to put the things in order. The veil often arrives to women who get married and when they are a bit older, like 40-50.

There is also a new phenomenon. The veil has become the fashion, it is chic and pretty. For some it is not about religion anymore.

I personally do not want to say an indefinite "No" to the veil, I never know. We'll see!

Generally Tunisia is a very open country and most of the people are secular. If you look around in there, then the majority of women do not wear the veil. You find a lot of people there who do their prayers and after that go out with friends, although alcohol by the religion is not allowed. It used to be advised just not to drink a lot, but people started to be drunk while they were praying. They didn't concentrate anymore, so that's why it became prohibited.

A big part of Tunisians live abroad. It is usual for people to leave for studies or work. Tunisians have very open spirits and this is seen rather as a benefit for the country.

Western world in general shocked me in the beginning, I saw more women wearing *Burqa* in England that I ever saw in Tunisia. During the previous government in Tunisia, girls were not even allowed to go to university or work while wearing the veil. There is a lot of controversy about the veil in France. French people are not very accepting towards the topic. At the same time, I think it is necessary to follow the local laws and respect the citizens. If one doesn't like it, they can return to their home country.

I have now been living in France for almost 2 years. I had been here several times before, but I finally moved here after I got married. Me and my husband had two weddings, one in Tunisia and the other in France. None of them were religious, even in Tunisia it can only be a civil marriage. But my husband had to convert himself to Islam before we got

married because the male always needs to be Muslim in order to marry. The conversion is just a piece of paper, doesn't say a lot. My husband is a believer, he believes in the same values as in all religions. He even tried to do Ramadan with me! Now in April 2015 we had our first baby.

Olen koostanud töö iseseisvalt. Kõik töö koostamisel kasutatud teiste autorite tööd, põhimõttelised seisukohad, kirjandusallikatest ja mujalt pärinevad andmed on viidatud.

Olen nõus oma töö avaldamisega Tartu Ülikooli digitaalarhiivis DSpace.

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Silja-Madli Ossip